

Can these 4 things reduce your cancer risk?

If someone told you that you could do four things to dramatically lower your risk of developing cancer, would you believe them? While some doubt that lifestyle changes can have a large effect on overall risk, a recent study suggests otherwise. The research published by JAMA Oncology says that 20 percent to 40 percent of cancer cases—and about 50 percent of all deaths from cancer—could be prevented if people did four things, namely exercise regularly, maintain a healthy BMI, not smoke, and drink alcohol only in moderation.

Researchers examined more than 130,000 participants. They divided the participants in two groups: the first, healthier group, was considered “low risk” and the second group was “high risk.” Researchers looked at how likely the participants in each group were to develop certain cancers.

They found that the low-risk group was less likely to develop and die from cancers. This group had the following common characteristics:

- They didn’t smoke.
- They didn’t drink, or drank in moderation.
- They had a healthy weight.
- They exercised regularly – either exercised vigorously for 75 minutes a week or did 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise.

“There are some cancer risk factors that are not in our control, such as age, family history or having previous biopsies,” says Dr. Heidi Memmel, a breast surgeon at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. “But there are several factors that we can control. For example, being overweight or obese, smoking and alcohol use can increase your risk of breast cancer, while diet and exercise can reduce it.”

This is not news! We have heard about the importance of these simple lifestyle choices for years—eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, reduce stress, make time for spiritual practice or meditation. But it really works! Daily choices to nurture our bodies protect us from cancer and many other health issues.

Prayer: God, give us love for our bodies and help us embrace the choices that nourish them.

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You have breast cancer, now what?

Hearing the words “you have breast cancer” will literally stop you in your tracks. It can be overwhelming, confusing and downright emotional. It’s important to take a deep breath, clear your mind of all the negative thoughts and focus on getting well again.

“I advise all of my patients to take a step back and remember that knowledge is power. The more you know about your disease and treatment options, the better you will feel about your decisions and be equipped with the tools you need to fight your disease,” says Dr. Gale England, an Advocate Medical Group breast surgeon at Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove, IL.

Gain a better understanding of your stage of cancer. Sit down with your doctor and go over the pathology report together. This will provide important information so that you can make the best decisions for your recovery, such as:

- Type and aggressiveness (grade) of the cancer
- If it’s invasive
- If it’s spread to the lymph nodes or other organs
- Hormone-receptor status
- Develop a treatment plan. Your doctor may suggest several treatment options from local therapy, such as surgery, to systemic therapy, such as chemotherapy. Ask questions about the risks and benefits of each option. Consider each option carefully.

Dr. England suggests women consider a second opinion. “A second opinion can confirm the diagnosis and help you make a decision about treatment options. Some centers may even have different treatment options that could be beneficial to your treatment plan,” says England.

Assemble a support team. Remember that you are not alone. Your spouse, parents, family members and friends want to support you throughout this journey. Consider joining a support team at your treatment facility so you can get all of your questions answered along the way.

Finally, receive the support and care of your faith community. We are often reluctant to share what we are going through or to ask for help. Prayer, practical help, periodic check-ins from congregation members, or talking with your faith leader will connect you with your Source and feed your spirit for the journey of healing.

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